

Start with the Smile

By Cougar

“Try to imagine you’re at this party,” he said. He was smiling at the time. Truth was, he seemed to smile a whole lot of the time. It was one of the things that fascinated me about him. I, on the other hand, was definitely **not** smiling.

“What do you mean ‘at a party’?” I said, reluctantly. “It’s yet another tragedy I’m having. I’m struggling to keep my head above water. If I can’t figure out how to make things happen better than they are right now, well, maybe I’m just going under.” I forced the words out. They tasted bitter stumbling off my tongue. Talking about my troubles for me was never easy. Yet how many times before had I said these same words, or something so very like them?

We were sitting on the cold ground before John LongTrail’s small, backyard firepit. Large tulip poplars shot straight up all around us—rough, gray trunks, many fatter than telephone poles. Above, the still, bare branches of early Spring created a dense web of dark lines against the late afternoon sky. As always when he talked with me like this, LongTrail built a fire first. He offered either tobacco or corn meal (or both) in pinches into it, then invited me to do the same. Pale, hazy sun dropped away towards evening. Yet tiny buds were there, on branches all around us. Another ten days perhaps, and a million baby leaflets would pop out, to seclude this little clearing for yet another summer. Would I be there to sit in it?

“Well...” LongTrail said, “maybe you need to think of it as a costume party... some of the guests MIGHT be wearing rather nasty disguises... But it’s only a Halloween parade after all. No need to go ballistic about it.”

He grinned at me and arranged more small sticks on the fire. They crackled and popped. Dry bark peeled away in the tumbling flames. I shook my head and looked down, scratching tense little “X’s” in the dirt by my legs. I was close to walking off right then and there. Except--this tall, cryptic old man seemed like my last hope.

“Please, LongTrail,” I said finally, “I need some help here. This woman I married, her three little boys--the whole thing is heading over a cliff. I’m working two jobs, I’m doing housework. I’m reading stories at bedtime and driving Jimmy to soccer practice... And she still acts like she’s an abused wife who might as well be a single mom. She even says that, she calls herself a ‘single mom’! I’ll be finishing the dishes and maybe even starting to fold clothes—and damned if she doesn’t make some remark like that. ‘Oh, as a single-mom, I have to think first of my three boys; I can’t rely on anyone ELSE to help me with that.’ Fuck it!! What in god’s name did I marry her for, if not that?!”

LongTrail nodded his head off towards the underbrush. “Quite a pair, you two,” he said. Two sparrows chased each other there through the low, thorny branches. When they took off or landed on the dry earth, their tiny, whirring wings raised little puffs of dirt and twigs. Very often, it seemed as if the whole woods would echo, or somehow illustrate this man’s statements. I swear I didn’t know whether to love or to hate him for this.

“I think she’s trying to make me furious at her,” I said. The sparrows, mating no doubt, plunged on in their dance. “It’s like everybody she’s ever been with really has abused her. And she can’t conceive of it not happening here and now once again. So she tries to provoke it, to resolve the issue and get the terrible suspense over with. But hell I’m not going to raise a hand to her. That was my Dad’s thing, not mine. That’s the opposite of everything I fell in love with her to do or be. I’m the good guy here.”

LongTrail watched smoke drift slowly upwards through the bare branches. “And she doesn’t get it, does she, Mark boy,” he said. “She just doesn’t get it.”

“No she doesn’t,” I said quietly.

“You can’t give her what she won’t take,” he said. “Show a horse to pure, sweet water, but if the poor creature thinks it’s poison, there’s not a thing you can do about it.”

“I... I gave up **everything** for this,” I said, forcing the whole, terrible truth out. “I **married** this particular horse, and her three kicking-screaming colts too. And now she gathers them up around her, looks at me like I’m the villain, and is clearly getting ready to walk out. We’ve already been to **two different** counselors. She just **won’t** talk to them. It’s horrible. I love her. Yet I can’t pull her out of this crash dive. She’s **gonna’ have** another failure, and because of that, I am too—maybe the biggest one I’ve ever had.”

“So what THEN?” LongTrail asked. A breeze stirred now, swirling the smoke off towards the East, away from the tepid sunset, into the coming darkness. I felt fear, like the taste of some acid in my mouth. Sometimes this lanky teacher-man seemed to care about me so much. But then he could turn around and become as hard as the occasional ironwood tree that grew in his forest.

“So what then?” he said again, looking at me. And there it was once more, plain as day, just the tiniest hint of a grin on his face.

“God dammit!” I growled. Tears popped out now. “DON’T you play games with me. I came to you for HELP. **I’m** sitting here with **my guts** spread out on the ground, strewn around by a very lovely, extremely sick young mother. It’s vicious, and she can’t stop it. And I don’t know if I’m going to be able to put myself back together again. HOW CAN YOU JUST SIT THERE AND GRIN AT ME!?”

LongTrail’s face went suddenly very grave. He stared at me for a minute and then turned his head back to the fire. Another pinch of tobacco came out of his old leather pouch and found its way from his heart into the flames. I saw then that his hand was shaking. And so we sat—neither of us able to find words. The sun was gone. The small fire, increasingly bright in the deepening dusk, hissed and burred away in a language as old as time itself. LongTrail seemed about to speak again, but at that point his wife Maymay approached the little clearing with mugs in her hands.

“Brought you some tea,” she stated. She took in our faces and postures, one after the other, slouched and silent in the flickering light. “Sorry but I’d best get back to the house now,” she said then. “I’ve got a yoga class to teach in a little bit.

“Thanks Maymay,” he told her. I was quiet, huddled over the hot tea, steam coming up, salt tears running down.

“Look, Mark,” LongTrail said, when she had gone. “You already see the picture. Knowing you as I do, I don’t expect you’re going to let her pull you down. Her blindness makes her unable to receive, even (or perhaps especially) the things she most wants and needs. You’ve got her figured pretty good. But your blindness makes you offer your **all**, your everything, to someone who just HAS to say no to it. What about that? What’s YOUR angle? Aren’t you worth more than that? What is it YOU can’t believe is possible?”

“Ah Christ,” I said. “I’ve known that answer for fucking ever. Still trying to rescue Mom and the brothers and sister from an alcoholic Dad. Sure and what good does that do me? Knowing stuff about that just doesn’t seem to change the deepest movements of my heart. Again and again it goes for these wounded creatures. I mean it really does!! Jesus, LongTrail, what am I going to do? I can’t keep surviving one tragedy just to plunge headlong into another!!”

“Well,” he said, “I’m really afraid it starts just like I told you: you have to imagine you are at this party.” And I could somehow tell, when he said that, that he was back to smiling again. He was just keeping the look of it off of his face out of respect for my pain. Out of respect for my lack of understanding. For I was simply not ready to hear at that point about any damned party. If anything, it was perhaps whatever the fire had said during our long silence that kept me from doing myself in during the dark months that followed. Or maybe the love brewed up into Maymay’s tea. Anyway, that’s what happened--my second, my very big and supposedly final marriage went obstinately screaming into the very pits of hell.

And so it was many moons before I began to grasp what LongTrail was getting at with that “imagine you’re at a party” line of his. Jill and the boys had left me. I had held myself together but still retreated into a period of solitude and grief that lasted three quarters of a year. The funny thing was, he hadn’t been joking at all. LongTrail was groping for an image, for an analogy that would allow me to see how it was he was managing to dance so effectively with reality at that point in his life. The same reality that had threatened constantly for many decades to overwhelm him, just as it was now threatening to overwhelm me.

When I next saw the man, right around a year later, he was sitting still in that same little clearing. Once again the billion buds of early spring grew fat on the chilly branches. But this time there were 6 or 7 people sitting around listening to him. Who were they? He was experimenting with more or less regular teachings, I had heard. I was late for one of them. I walked up just in time to hear him finish a little talk he was giving.

“So that’s it,” he said to them. “You really are at that party. Most of your troubles arise because you are not polite. It is neither more nor less than that simple fact. You don’t smile. You’re rude. You’re no fun to be around. Gifts, even lavish ones, offers of joy, challenge, or companionship—mostly all of these are wasted on you. So, if you want to put a big dent in all your troubles, well, the first and main thing you have to do is start smiling. Show signs of learning some manners. Remember—the wisest teachers among us say that everything you encounter at this festival of life is exactly what you need to transform. For god’s sake, my friends, if that doesn’t deserve a big smile, what could?”

With that, he grew quiet, rekindling the smoldering fire. I nodded to him, and squatted on the fringes of the circle. The formal teaching session was over for the moment, I guessed, and there didn't seem to be any questions. The sound of a small ship's bell rang through the woods. Mounted on red cedar logs over the rear deck, it meant "come to the house now." Maymay was serving tea. I marveled at the synergy of my arrival here: another afternoon, so like the last, another fire, another cup of tea—and still this damned party thing.

We walked over, got our cups, stood in groups. People drifted around—some hanging out by the deck, some moving back to the fire. Then I noticed something—they were all trying so hard to smile. In this strained, rather self-conscious way, they were aware of their faces and the content of LongTrail's teaching. Did they all want to look like they had "gotten it"? Or had they really taken the smile thing to heart? This was so curious looking, so cute almost, that suddenly I popped a very real grin. LongTrail saw me and we shared a moment. I think it amused him too, along with a lovely, blonde-haired woman who reminded me of Jill. He walked over, warming his hands on a large stoneware mug. The face of a panther stared out from its side.

"Good to see you!" he said. "You been away?"

"No," I said. "Oh, well, maybe... Jill and the boys left last Fall. I was alone in this huge, empty, four-bedroom house. Mostly I stayed there inside, listening to the echoes. Found a couple of long term woodwork projects, built just enough stuff to stay alive... Stared at flames in the fireplace and cried a lot in the evenings... I was away I guess... away inside." Of course, in saying this, I glossed over quite a bit. In truth, I had gone almost too deep into my own heart of darkness.

"But you're here again now," LongTrail said, as if it were something exciting or wonderful. "You survived to walk out again." I think he would have said more, or maybe even given me one of his huge, happy hugs. But the blonde walked over just then, and he had to talk to her. Really, I was almost relieved. If he had hugged me at that moment, with her standing there, I would likely have wept on the spot. What a bummer. "Hang around till the others are gone, OK?" he said to me.

I talked to MayMay a bit. She knew what had been going on with me, and she was glad to see me too. Later, after everybody else left, I found LongTrail out by the fire.

"You know," he said, arising from a kind of reverie, "we really are the fire. We are dirt and water that learned how to breathe the fire."

I grinned at him. "Well, YOU surely are the fire, LongTrail," I said. He saw me smiling.

"Good to see some sunshine on your face, Mark boy," he said. "Maybe you're ready to actually HEAR my theory about the cosmic party now."

"Yeah," I answered. "I guess you really **weren't** mocking me when you said that stuff a year ago."

“No indeed,” he said, joking now, and puffing himself up like a peacock. “I was struggling to express the real, inner truth. It was my next, best-ever shot at explaining the little-known workings of an earthwalk we both share.”

“And now you’ve got it pretty well worked out, right?” I said. LongTrail was always thinking, trying always in his rough, experienced, practical way to formulate the lessons of a long and often troubled life. I so admired him for that. Someday, I wanted to be like that too. Assuming that is, I could ever stop shooting myself in the foot.

“Look,” he said, “I know this might sound strange, or somehow not even relevant—but give it a chance and hear me out. Humor me. Really try to imagine that you are at a very big, very special kind of party. Think of a huge, extremely important festival, maybe. One that literally everybody has to come to, all decked out in their finest costumes or outfits. Just like in a parade, everybody is there to display whatever is different, wonderful, and unique about their particular shapes, sizes, and ways of being. ‘Just LOOK at me,’ they all say, ‘SEE what a fabulous whatever I’ve grown into.’”

Alright, I thought, fair enough. “Like the parade of life?” I said. And I tried to put myself mentally at that parade.

“Yeah,” he said, “OK. Like the parade of life. But now here you are at this party, taking part in this grand, wonderful festival, and what are you doing? How are you behaving? Are you shining out joyously the radiance of your own special stuff? Remember—that’s what THIS affair is for. Or are you morose, grouchy, unaware? Are you a total bummer, a turbulent, wrong-way influence that fails to acknowledge anybody else’s beauty, and bumps other dancers right in the middle of their most intricate steps. So ask yourself now, what are you doing at this party?”

It was almost dark. Fireglow, orange and yellow, flared on the trunks of the tulip poplars, lit up long, thorny branches in the surrounding underbrush. Strange shadows came and went. I was just silent after he asked me this. I **suppose** I had to be one of the bummer, but it didn’t seem fair to blame **me** for that. It seemed like I never had a chance to be anything else. After a minute, LongTrail went on.

“Because if you are doing the second,” he continued, “if you are being the grouch, then don’t be surprised if the other dancers have come to resist you. You’re no fun for them. They see you coming and try to push you out of their way, right out of the Parade, maybe. It’s for winners, remember. And of course, your tendency is to take this as confirmation that reality really IS out to get you, that things ARE out-of-control unfair--and then let that depress you even more. In this way, you can end up using the other dancers to help pound yourself deeper into your own private hole. You confirm yourself over and over again as a loser, a misfit, someone who cannot ever partake in this glorious Parade. Even though these same dancers would much rather accept and love you.”

I was thinking about the history of my relationships at that moment. He had expressed the negative spiral quite well. I could probably trace it on back. “If that’s all true,” I said softly, “then it’s a vicious circle. It feeds back on itself, reinforcing the wrong perception.” It scared

me almost, thinking about it there. But still, another voice within me said, it wasn't my fault, dammit!

"Now I don't want to personalize this too much," LongTrail said. "I don't want to be talking about 'you Mark,' all the time. Who knows if this even applies to you?" He paused and gave me a wary look. "So let's just refer here to a sort of generic person like this. Let's call such a person a 'shut-down,' or from a more positive point of view, a 'poorly expanded one'."

But I was already completely adrift at this point. Why did some Jill-look-alike have to show up here today anyway? With growing bitterness, my wandering mind followed chains of humiliations back through my life. When had I ever gotten a chance for any of it to be different? When—WHAM!! Without warning, there was a stiff thump on my back. LongTrail, watching me lose track, had reached over and slapped me hard there. "HEY!" I cried. I raised my hand then dropped it again. I swallowed hard, and hung on to the warmth and flames of the fire. He was right. What good would any of that do?

"So how do you get out of it?" I whispered. As I focused in again, I felt a tremendous need for some sort of alternative to this bitter, self-affirming despair. "That's what I was trying to ask you a year ago. If you've already taken that plunge, and maybe you can even see yourself sliding down--how the hell do you reverse it?"

"You smile," he said.

"What?!" Oh I knew LongTrail liked to sprinkle his teaching with little dramatic moments, but surely he was stretching it with this one. I wanted something concrete to work with. "Come on... really now," I said, "what CAN you do about this?"

With great, solemn emphasis, then, he said it again. "You START SMILING."

"Well what ABOUT?" I said. "What the hell have you got to smile about anyway?"

"About ANYTHING," he replied. "Any little thing you can find... About NOTHING... you paste a smile on your face even if its entirely phony."

"Oh come on LongTrail," I said, "be serious." And he glared at me then so fiercely I almost wanted to run.

"No Mark," he shouted, "YOU be serious. This is the most serious moment in our shut-down's stuck little life. When a poorly expanded person finds himself down that deep in this kind of a hole, he needs to START SMILING... or else..."

"OK," I said, after a minute. "I give up... How in the world do you boil this whole complicated thing down to a smile?"

"Well, there **are** several damned good reasons," he said. "First of all, to everybody else at the Party, remember, our friend the shut-down is mostly just terminally impolite. Who wants to dance with a grouch? So a smile, which is an external gesture of warmth and respect--even if he fakes it--a smile is that first signal that he might perhaps WANT to acquire some manners. With a smile pasted on his face, some of the dancers at least won't bump him away. Before long, one or two are very likely to spin around a couple of times with him. Once that happens,

now he's got something real to smile about, even if he had nothing at all when he first started. Somebody reached out to him. Boom, for the first time maybe, even if only a little bit, his spiral is reversed."

"Well, alright," I allowed. "That's the old 'fake it till you make it' thing. But that's pretty thin, isn't--"

"Not so fast Mark," he cut me off. "I'm not finished and it goes much deeper than that. We said that everybody was at this party to show off their best moves, right? Well, now, what if some of those moves, while perhaps brilliant and perfectly executed, were not at all nice. What if we could look closely at this Parade and see that some beings were shoving the wrong way down the street, spraying mud on other people's outfits, and generally being royal pains-in-the-ass. What if that was their unique special thing—that they messed stuff up? Now I ask you, what is the difference between these "nasty" beings and our friend the shut-down? Because our poorly expanded one also goes down the street messing things up, doesn't he?"

"Well not much difference at all, I would say," I answered him. "In fact, I think you just messed up your whole analogy with that..."

"No I didn't," he said, exasperated at me. "OK shut up and just listen for a minute. I am extending the metaphor. You haven't gotten it yet. In fact, there is all the difference in the world. Look closely with me now at these two beings, and you'll see what I mean. The reaction of the dancers to the Nasty Ones is quite different from their reaction to the shut-down. When a Nasty comes along, some of the dancers skip nimbly around and avoid any disruption. They've seen these moves before. Others are engaged by the Nasty, but cope with the disruption by enfolding the confusion as best they can into their dance. But notice, nobody tries to shove the Nasty out of the Parade. Whereas, increasingly, nearly everybody does exactly that to the shut-down—they try to shove him out of the Parade. Why? In fact, these royal Nasties can cause far more trouble than the poorly expanded one—why accept them and reject him?"

Because life's unfair, the bitter voice within **me** said. Fortunately I held my tongue. After all, he had told me to be quiet. Looking back on it now from a distance, I realize he probably would have stopped explaining things to me if I had erupted once again with this "life's unfair" thought. And rightly so, I can say now, from my current perspective. If I wanted to hypnotize myself with that self-fulfilling message, he couldn't stop me, anymore than I could stop Jill from leaving. So instead of answering, I shrugged my shoulders. A kind of silly, apologetic grin appeared on my face.

"Very good," LongTrail said. "the Nasties, you see, are having a really good time, doing something—nasty—that they do really well. Obviously, if this is a parade of unique accomplishments, they qualify for it. Our shut-down, on the other hand, is having a miserable time. Those unaware, boorish, clumsy behaviors are not some kind of proud achievement of his. He is not there saying, 'look at the wonderfully terrible monster I have become,'—whereas that is exactly what all the royal Nasties are doing. Our shut-down's being crushed, and it's no fun for him at all. The Nasties are showing off. Now—does that sound like a difference to you?"

As LongTrail said these last sentences, I felt a kind of ripple in my gut. There was a dizzy feeling in which everything flipped around—like looking at an Escher painting in which all

the stairways shifted suddenly from going down to going up. Boy, all at once there was something I really did see. How did I manage to miss that before?? LongTrail waited, and put sticks on the fire. An early owl hooted softly somewhere off to the south. We cocked our heads and listened. Part of me grappled with the mental shift. Another part wondered fleetingly if LongTrail heard messages in the owl's hoots. For my part, I found them unsettling.

“On one level,” he said after some minutes had passed. “This whole huge festival is about two things. YOU form the respectful, aware audience for others to show off their best stuff; and in turn you get to show off YOUR best stuff to them. If our shut-down stays all wrapped up in his troubles, he sucks as an audience. And what is he showing off? Well, eventually, the only thing the shut-down presents to the other guests **at all** is his troubles. So, more or less by default, those **troubles** come to constitute his only version of any ‘best stuff.’ Proud of it or not, what he’s really accomplished at is being a victim. Now who really grooves on that? Well, the royal Nasties, of course. So every so often, the dancers do let a shut-down into the Dance. And they do that by all gathering around and letting some great big Nasty beat the shit out of him.”

“Oh...” I said, feeling another internal wrenching at this.

“In some perverse way,” LongTrail whispered, leaning over towards me. “In some perverse way, it’s the only thing he seems to enjoy.” The old medicine man’s voice rasped in my ear. Maybe he clapped his hands or something.

Without warning then I felt myself projected. Gravity failed, and suddenly I was suspended, all defenses down, in a great, quivering space between abject fear and real hope. The darkness, the trees, mental echoes of the owl’s hoots, flickering shafts of the small fire’s flame on thorny, tangled branches—they all at once seemed to be looking at me. I felt exposed to a great, sentient wilderness. It could see my very essence, and all protections, all evasions, all shelters were useless. From out of this living darkness, anything could come at me. And LongTrail was basically saying that if I wallowed around in my despair too long, something would come for me. I think he just sat there and watched me tremble. He knew I knew what the monsters were—more broken relationships, more periods when I couldn’t earn enough to live on, more humiliations. On the other hand, I had seen the stairways also going up. LongTrail wasn’t just saying the Nasties could get me. What possessed me that I saw first only the dark side of it? Those same beings looking at me right now from this same sentient wilderness—they could just as easily dump treasures in my lap. A successful family, abundance, fulfillment in my artistic efforts. For god’s sake, he was also saying they loved me. How could I start seeing the good stuff first?

“So let’s go back to the SMILE,” LongTrail said, smiling a very broad, very phony-looking smile at me. “Does that maybe make a little more sense now?” I hung there for another long moment in the fateful space between “yes” and “no.” And some part of me, especially after that last, terrible dance with Jill, had had enough of “no.” My mind took hold and began to work on the “up” way in all of this. The stairways DID go up as well as down. Different parts of Longtrail’s festival metaphor rose into place. Maybe some of the dancers were once shut-down themselves. Maybe they remembered how hard it was to smile in that state. So... maybe it was a big deal.

“Here’s a thought,” I said. “Is it possible that sometimes, some of the dancers who push the poorly expanded ones out of the Parade might even be doing so out of pity... as a way of protecting them from the Nasties?”

“THERE you go!” LongTrail said. The smile changed and became very, very real. “Maybe they, being much more attentive to the dancers around them,” he went on, “maybe they know some particular Nasty is just about to arrive. Shoving the shut-down out, which he sees as rejection, maybe sometimes that’s even a gift of protection, of compassion. Excellent! Course, you also might also want to consider that victimization is not one of the higher pleasures of the Dance.”

“So you **smile**,” I said, “not merely as an external sign of attention, or good-will, or respect, but also because... well, it’s like your planting the seedling of your own enjoyment. You start it there on the surface, and try to grow it inwards till it takes root inside your heart. Because the only thing you can do in this whole Parade that is really wrong... is fail to **enjoy** being... exactly who you are.”

“Bingo!” said LongTrail, softly. His eyes were shining. “It’s not rocket science. It’s just too way simple for most people to believe. You cultivate your very own, radiant, sacred inner smile. All the beings really participating in this party have got it, and the more evolved these beings become, the more lovingly unshakable that smile grows. Watch them! Learn from them! They smile radiantly at the Lovelies, and they smile just as radiantly at the Nasties. And if one of the Nasties manages to shake that smile, then the truly great ones smile even more at the gift of learning that shaking represents—for here is another of their little, left-over imbalances revealed to begin the healing process.”

“My god,” I said, taking this in. “What a different point of view this all is. It’s like tuning the same set to a whole different channel.” We were silent then, both smiling out into the dark woods. Though LongTrail and I were to have many more conversations about this between then and now, though I had much to learn as yet about how to root the sacred smile solidly in my daily awareness--still, it was at this point that I really began to transform the dark patterns of my broken heart.

“It is the grand communal desire of the Dance,” LongTrail said, “that everyone participate in it, so that its glory may be complete. Whether you are enfolded by it, pushed out, or attacked by some Nasty in full view of everyone around, all of these responses are offered to you in the hopes that you will have your fill of pain, and the bitterness that prolongs pain... that you will give up your sad stubborn ways, wake up, and starting sharing your own joyous beauty with those around you. Think of exquisite, loving beings smiling on all sides, saying, ‘Oh please stop being such a BORE... show us YOUR dance’. And all you have to do to fix things is just simply smile back at them.”

Later than night, driving home to the big empty house, I had another thought. Those stairways I had seen, going up or going down--they were not neutral. One way or the other, they swept you along. Really they were more like escalators. If so, then LongTrail’s message was clear—your smile was the “up” switch.